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SUBJECT: America House in Sri Lanka: A Platform for Reconciliation

¶1. SUMMARY: The Government of Sri Lanka's military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has brought an end to the island's 26-year conflict. However, winning the peace and overcoming deep mistrust that exists between communities will be a major challenge. A critical element of those efforts will be building reconciliation among youth, as fifty percent of Sri Lanka's population is under the age of thirty. The Embassy's Public Diplomacy section is spearheading the Mission's efforts to support youth reconciliation. To this end, Post has drafted a Strategic Communication Plan that refocuses its PD resources and tools on this goal. Post seeks additional resources to expand its programming and activities related to the plan. At the center of these efforts, Post seeks funds at this time to open and support a resource center and two regional satellites to serve as PD platforms. PAO discussed the issue with RSO Colombo. RSO approved in principle the opening of facilities that are not co-located with Embassy on the Chancery compound, provided PD funds security upgrades and coordinates co-location waivers with DS, OBO and RSO Colombo. End Summary.

Youth: A Vital Element of Reconciliation

¶2. Fifty percent of Sri Lanka's population is under 30 years of age, according to a report from the United Nations' Population Division. After 26 years of intermittent war, approximately half of the people of Sri Lanka do not have an active memory of pre-conflict Sri Lanka. Instead, their image of Sri Lanka has been defined by nearly three decades of violence, division, and mistrust between ethnic communities. Moreover, during the conflict there were few opportunities for young people to interact with other youth who lived "behind enemy lines." With such limited contact, prejudices developed and solidified. Although the physical divides may disappear with the end of the conflict, the mental and psychological divides remain. Moving forward, forging a lasting peace will depend on engaging youth from different backgrounds in initiatives that promote cooperation and reconciliation and help to support the development of a tolerant, democratic, and united Sri Lanka.

Public Diplomacy Programming:
Enabling Reconciliation

¶3. Post's Public Diplomacy section is spearheading the Mission's efforts to engage and influence Sri Lanka's youth in support of reconciliation. Programs aim to provide youth with the skills to become active citizens and opportunities to work together with their peers from other backgrounds to address issues of local and national concern. To this end, the Mission has refocused its Public Diplomacy tools and resources around a Strategic Communications Plan targeting youth. The plan has three primary objectives: 1) Youth around the country work together on projects that strengthen cooperation and counter extremism; 2) Youth around the country have access to quality English language instruction and English is used as a tool to bridge language barriers between Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking youth; and 3) Youth become leaders in their communities and work together across ethnic and regional divides to tackle issues of local and national importance.

¶4. Under this Strategic Communications plan, Post has already organized several programs and initiatives. To support the first objective, Post is co-sponsoring a nation-wide youth conference that will take place this summer. In line with the goals of the conference, Post will organize the participation of an American speaker who will focus on motivating and organizing young women to

become involved in community leadership. Post will also provide assistance to ensure the entire conference is simultaneously interpreted into Sinhala and Tamil. In support of the second objective, Post recently concluded a three-week English Teacher training workshop that brought together teachers from both Sinhala and Tamil backgrounds. Later this year, for the second phase of the program, the teachers will work together to train additional teachers. To support the third objective, in April, Post sent 17 -young community and business leaders on a three-week exchange program to the US. The program focused on creating strategies for youth to work together, across ethnic and geographic boundaries, to address community challenges. The participants are now working together with colleagues they met in the US to design projects that will be implemented in Sri Lanka.

Ideal Time to Increase Resources

¶15. With the end of the war, now is the optimal time to increase Public Diplomacy resources and greatly expand Post's reconciliation efforts among youth. A relatively small amount of financial resources can go a long way in extending the Mission's ability to positively influence youth.

Martin Luther King Jr House and Hubs

¶16. At the center of Post's Strategic Communications plan is the establishment of a resource center in Colombo, outside of the Embassy walls, with a corresponding network of mini-resource centers in regions outside of Colombo. To promote the notion of tolerance and diversity, the resource center would be called the "Martin Luther King Jr (MLK) House" and the mini resource centers "MLK Hubs." The MLK House and Hubs would include four main components: English language teaching facilities; a space for programming (discussions, lectures, meetings, workshops and cultural events); a resource library; and an IT center for programs and classes.

¶17. Administratively, the MLK House and Hubs would be affiliated with and run by the United States-Sri Lanka Fulbright Commission. A management board with two US Embassy employees and the Executive Director of Fulbright would hire, oversee, and evaluate the manager of the center (to ensure US Embassy control). Fulbright has a long and respected history in Sri Lanka. Partnering with the Fulbright Commission would help to overcome access concerns, while creating a management structure that enables the Embassy to maintain control over the network.

¶18. Funding would be needed to lease the space, upgrade the facilities, and pay staff salaries. Post would aim to generate revenue from the network through fee-based English and IT classes (some classes would also be free of charge), membership at the resource center, renting space to outside groups, and allowing use of digital video conference equipment and simultaneous translation facilities for a fee.

¶19. PAO discussed the issue with RSO Colombo. RSO opined that opening facilities that are not co-located with on the Chancery compound is possible, provided PD funds security upgrades and coordinates collocation waivers with DS, OBO and RSO Colombo.

¶10. Post eventually plans for MLK Hubs to be located in eight cities, in or near locations where Post has Access English Microscholarship programs. Each hub would include a small resource center and a multipurpose room for programs, meetings, or classes. One full-time coordinator would run each hub. Initially, Post would like to establish two hubs to complement the MLK house; the pilot hubs would be located in Kandy and Oluvil, where post currently has American Corners. Other hubs would be opened pending the availability of funds and the success of the pilot hubs.

Increased Public Diplomacy Programming

¶11. The MLK Network is a central element of Post's Strategic Communications Plan. Programs and activities at the Center and the Hubs will help the Mission maximize the effectiveness of its PD programming and meet the three objectives of the plan. In addition to establishing the MLK Center and Hubs, post is planning other

youth reconciliation programs over the next year. The following programs are some of the activities/initiatives planned.

Youth Volunteer Corps

¶A. Post is working with the Peace Secretariat, a governmental institution that supports reconciliation, and Roteract, the youth wing of the Rotary Club, to organize a program where youth leaders from urban areas spend 2-3 weeks volunteering at schools in rural areas. Post will work with US-based specialists to help design the program and would provide financial support to start the program.

Sri Lanka through My Eyes

¶B. Post is organizing a nation-wide program where youth who have little or no filmmaking experience work in multi-ethnic, multi-regional teams to learn the basics of filmmaking and script writing and make short films on themes that reflect values common to the participants. At the end of the program, films will be screened at events in each of the program cities and on national television. Internships for some participants will be organized in coordination with program partners. An American filmmaker will lead the project, working together with local filmmakers.

This I Believe

¶C. Based on a radio program created by Edward R. Murrow and broadcast on National Public Radio, working together with the MLK Hubs and House, Post is organizing a program for youth to write essays on their core beliefs and values. Essays will be written in the student's native language, but translated into other languages. Selected essays will be featured regularly on a national radio station.

ACCESS Community Grants

¶D. Annually, Post would like to bring together top students from the Access English Microscholarship program for a four-day workshop at the King House in Colombo. The workshop would focus on using English as a tool to build greater understanding. As part of the program, working in teams comprised of students from various cities and ethnic backgrounds, students would develop community projects to implement in their towns. Each team would be given a small grant (\$500 maximum).

Traveling Teachers

¶E. Post would like to develop an English language curriculum for rural areas that combines classroom instruction with text messaging follow-up and phone assignments. Three teams of two teachers would each cover five villages. Schedules would be arranged that they visit each village for a class every two weeks. Interim assignments would be conducted via text messaging and by phone and supervised through a call center of 2-3 teachers who would be located at the King House in Colombo. Teachers would be Sri Lankan, but trained by Americans. Curriculum design would also be done by a US specialist.

Resource Request

¶12. With the end of the conflict in Sri Lanka and new opportunities to support a lasting peace, Post requests the Department to consider supporting the opening of the Martin Luther King, Jr House in Colombo and two regional MLK Hubs. Post estimates the initial costs would be \$1.25-1.75 million with annual operating costs around \$300,000. Post will implement the other programs outlined above with existing funds and with additional resources that will be requested septel.

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